

Protecting history from the devastation of fire

CAL FIRE archaeologists critical in saving artifacts and cultural history during wildfires

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On March 30, 2006, the Society for California Archaeology gave CAL FIRE the M.R. Harrington Award for Conservation Archaeology. This award was presented to the department in recognition of its successful efforts to protect archaeological sites during wildfires. It was specifically given to CAL FIRE as a team award recognizing outstanding work by our staff archaeologists, incident commanders, and the entire work force of firefighters that have found a way to incorporate site protection efforts on private lands without hindering or delaying emergency response operations. Director Grijalva accepted the award on behalf of

the Department.

CAL FIRE archaeologists have been assigned to wildland fires for many years yet there are still people within the department who don't even know that CAL FIRE has archaeologists. This small but mighty award-winning team consists of six archaeologists who are assigned to fires of all different sizes. These fires are typically on or adjacent to tribal lands, where archaeological sites may be impacted. They also may be requested when a unit wishes to have an archaeologist's expertise in dealing with cultural resource issues.

CAL FIRE archaeologists identify and protect fragile, non-renewable archaeological, historical, and cultural resources whenever feasible. When archaeologists were initially assigned to fires, the concern was that the archaeologist would hinder the emergency response

operations by not allowing tactics necessary to fight the fire or by placing themselves in danger by not understanding fire behavior. This apprehension was unwarranted. Rob Lewin, who has worked with CAL FIRE archaeologists on many fires as both planning section chief and operations section chief, said "always the results were effective and positive."

As trained firefighters, they're able to quickly disburse to the ground while the fire is still burning. On the Sierra Incident in 2006, three different agency archaeologists were in the jurisdiction of the burning land, but only the CAL FIRE archaeologist was able to field inspect sites during the fire because both archaeologists from the other agencies weren't able to provide first hand information. This site was extremely important because two Native American sacred sites were mapped as having been impacted by bulldozers. The local tribes wanted to meet with fire officials to learn what happened and what could be done to repair the damage. The CAL FIRE archaeologist was able to make the determination that neither site was impacted. Meetings were held at each of the local tribal offices and their worries were quickly put to rest. This ability to respond quickly lessens the time needed during fire suppression repair, as much of the repair work near archaeological sites can be assessed and completed during the



Above, one of the many bedrock mortar outcrops at a village site that was protected during the Sierra Fire.

Right, mortar and pestle found in a newly discovered site in an area of the Sierra Fire that burned.



initial repair work.

Since most of CAL FIRE's work is on privately owned land, the CAL FIRE archaeologist may have little or no information on where known sites are located. Written records and maps for sites in the area may be available, although sometimes they're over 50 years old and not accurately described or mapped, therefore the archaeologist must use professional judgment to determine where sites may be located and get out ahead of the bulldozers to locate the sites.

During the Sierra Incident, 22 site locations were known and relocated and four additional sites were discovered when the archaeologist was surveying dozer lines, hand lines, and areas of retardant drops. One surprise during this fire was relocating a site that was previously recorded as a small site when in reality it was a fairly large undisturbed village site with more than 100 bedrock mortars, a large midden soil area over an acre in size, and hundreds of artifacts. The danger posed to this site was that it was in a prime location to be used for staging; luckily it was avoided and no damage was done. According to Lewin, "It is nice to know that our department is effectively working to preserve our history."

For the most part, archaeological site locations are kept confidential, which means firefighters and dozer operators may inadvertently impact sites that they could have avoided if they had known about them. Having a CAL FIRE archaeologist at the fires enables CAL FIRE to get site information disseminated to those in planning and out

on the lines in order to protect sites. CAL FIRE archaeologist can also teach people about the value of these resources, which includes seeing them first-hand, so people will be more interested in protecting them. According to Phil Veneris, "[the] skills as an Incident Archaeologist have proven valuable to me as an operations section chief on Incidents. [The archaeologist] always has a detailed plan to present to the Incident Action Plan and gives a good talk during the Operational Briefing." During the Topanga Fire in 2005, mysterious rock-art paintings graced the cover of one of the IAPs. This brought about a great deal of interest in local Native American culture and how our firefighting staff can protect sites during their suppression efforts.

Off the fires, CAL FIRE archaeologists spend many days each year teaching staff at the CAL FIRE Academy and throughout the state about our responsibility to protect sites. When discussing the protection of cultural resources during fires, an Incident Commander said, "When you overhear heavy fire equipment operators and crew captains talking passionately about archaeological sites, you know the message is getting delivered!"

Learn more about CAL FIRE archaeologists

visit the CAL FIRE website at www.fire.ca.gov, click on Resource Management, then Archaeology, then Reports.



A portion of one of eight rock art features at the Burro Flat site that was protected during the Topanga Fire.



Director Grijalva accepting the M.R. Harrington award from Society for California Archaeology president Shelly Davis-King.

Historic remains of unrecorded buildings located at a division break on the Sierra Fire.

